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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Wednesday, April 18, 1934.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "Caustic Poisons and the Law." Information from the Food and Drug Administration, U.S.D.A.

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Any mother would shudder with horror if you told her that a loaded revolver was lying around the house within easy reach of her children. Yet for many years, mothers all over this country have been using substances that are just as dangerous as any gun -- yes, using them calmly enough and keeping them where their children could get hold of them at any time. The reason is, of course, that everybody understands the possible danger from a loaded revolver, but few people realize that many of our common everyday household cleaning substances are just as dangerous. That box of drain or pipe cleaner that stands on the bathroom floor day after day, for example. Who would suspect that that innocent-looking box of cleaning powder could cause horrible burns, could put out eyes, might even cause death? And that bottle of ammonia standing there on the table -- a colorless liquid that looks as harmless as water and is useful in a thousand ways around the house, from washing hairbrushes to sponging Father's trousers -- who would guess what damage ammonia can do in the hands of an unsuspecting child? Suppose a child reaches for that bottle left standing on the table and takes a swallow or two thinking it is water. The ammonia will cause a stricture of the throat and the child may die from suffocation. Or perhaps the bottle tips over and some of the liquid falls on the child's face or in his eyes. The result may be blindness or horribly burned skin. We use other caustic poisons around the house frequently -- substances containing lye or carbolic acid and so on. Any of these caustic or corrosive poisons, as they are called, tasted by a curious child, can quickly eat out the membrane of the mouth and throat.

Such accidents have been happening down through the years -- horrible accidents to little children right in their own homes, all because their mothers had no way of knowing that these substances were dangerous. Grown people have also had similar accidents, taking doses of poison by mistake or, not knowing that they burned, handling them or letting them come in contact with their skin.

Well, in 1927 our friends in the Food and Drug Administration got on the job to help inform and thus protect people against these unnecessary tragedies. Congress passed the Federal Caustic Poison Act, requiring manufacturers to label the most dangerous of these substances as poison. With the word poison on the box or bottle, mothers know at least that the stuff isn't a suitable plaything for the youngsters. A cleaning powder, say, marked in this way at least is likely to stay on the high shelf, out of reach of small hands, and be used with care. The present law insists that the more dangerous of these caustic poisons be plainly labeled with that word "poison" and also that the label tell what to do in case of accidental contact with it -- taking it internally or getting it on the skin -- what to do, that is, until the doctor comes. For after the antidote is mentioned the label also says, "Call physician." And, by the way, another good point about this labeling is that the antidotes suggested are substances that most families will have on hand.

No telling how many lives have been saved and what frightful injuries prevented by this caustic poison Act.

You may be interested in knowing just which substances come under this law and just how strong each must be. Maybe you're not a chemist. But as a housewife you'll want to be familiar with these chemical names. Twelve corrosive materials come under this law: hydrochloric acid -- a ten per cent solution or more; sulphuric acid, ten per cent; nitric acid, five per cent; carbolic acid, five per cent; oxalic acid, ten per cent; any salt of oxalic acid, ten per cent; acetic acid, twenty per cent; hypochlorous acid or its salts, ten per cent; potassium hydroxide, ten per cent; sodium hydroxide (commonly called lye), ten per cent; silver nitrate, five per cent; and ammonia water, five per cent.

There's the list of chemicals that are caustic or corrosive, that are all poisonous and must be marked as such. They have their uses. But they need to be looked after with the greatest care.

This present law is a great protection to us, not only against these poisons in their pure state but also against preparations that contain them. But it is not a complete protection. Why? Well, in the first place, the law only has control over preparations that go into interstate commerce. That means that a manufacturer who makes and sells locally, just in his own state, won't have trouble with Federal authorities even if he refuses to label his product according to their specifications. Then, retail dealers throughout the country buy chemicals like carbolic acid, oxalic acid, sulphuric acid and silver nitrate in bulk and then deal out small quantities, taking small amounts out of the big containers. Well, the big containers are properly labeled but the small bottles often are not. So you'll be wise to learn just which substances are dangerous and to use these with the greatest care. Label them yourself, if necessary. To prevent mistakes, put a pin through the cork in the bottle. Then you'll know it's poison, even if you get it out in the dark.

Many poisons are not listed in the caustic poison law. For example, certain substances sold to kill insects are very poisonous, yet the law does not require them to be labeled so. And certain kinds of silver polish also contain poisons and don't have to be labeled as such. But many conscientious manufacturers have used warning labels of their own accord, or have put their poisonous preparations in containers of distinctive shape -- rough exteriors studded with knobs or points to warn you, even in the dark, that the chemical is dangerous.

The law as it stands is a great help to you, but as you see, you must also help yourself. Every cautious housewife will have a safe place to store all poisons to prevent accidents -- or death. She will see that all poisons are carefully labeled. And if she happens to be in doubt as to whether a substance is or isn't dangerous, she takes the precaution of keeping it out of the way of children.

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